

Reviews

Dig for Plenty

Lesley Acton, *Growing Space: a History of the Allotment Movement*, 270 pages, Five Leaves Publications, 2015, paperback ISBN 9781910170137, £14.99

Growing Space deals overwhelmingly with the 20th century history of the allotment movement. An earlier period, 1793 to 1873, is covered in a book by Jeremy Burchardt, which the author mentions in the acknowledgements as the inspiration behind her writing of the present highly readable and informative work. The allotment movement has ebbed and flowed, reflecting the changes in society and the material condition of the mass of the population. The Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions' impact on population distribution was, of course, profound, with Britain moving from a largely rural to a predominantly urban society, and this change ushered in the allotment both in its rural and urban forms.

Land enclosure, which had commenced in Tudor times, had nearly finished in the last years of Queen Victoria's reign. By the end of the 19th century, the allotment, whether as compensation for the rural poor's loss of common land or as a utilitarian dietary supplement and recreational activity for the city dweller, had become an important feature of the nation's life. Certainly, the allotment's popularity is a response to the clamour of urban existence, even now. If one has not got the money to 'flee to the country' then, undoubtedly, the allotment provides an inexpensive alternative.

The first chapter of *Growing Space* gives a brief overview of the period, noting, before launching into a detailed, mainly chronological series of chapters, that the number of allotments, their ups and downs, mirror changes in the attitudes and the requirements of the nation. The author charts these oscillations, placing them in historical context in an interesting and informative way. The tussles with the state, both in its local and centralised manifestations, form a key element of *Growing Space*, highlighting some of the connections and ramifications for society at large.

Allotment numbers rose fairly dramatically during wartime, and the 20th century, unfortunately, saw two world wars. As a large proportion of Britain's food supply was and is from imports, and as the war at sea was costly in lives and ships, 'Digging for Victory' was no idle slogan. At other times, the class war also impacted on the allotment movement, for

example in 1928, with the Quakers playing a crucial role in setting up the Coalfields Distress Committee, which was to make available food for unemployed miners' families through 'providing and restoring' allotment sites.

Throughout the 20th century, the allotment movement had its friends and enemies. When it came to government, both local and central, whether it was as friend or foe often depended on what ministerial hat was being worn. In turn, the authorities' relationships with the allotment movement were often dependent on commercial pressures. Local authorities may have coveted land for 'development', which often meant housing, while other more sympathetic local authorities were keen to protect and extend allotments, not least for the health of the community. Throughout the period between the two world wars, unemployment remained stubbornly high, as did the consequent demand for allotments.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the importance of allotments was immediately recognised by national government and, at its conclusion, the demand for allotments was unabated with the slogan 'Dig for Victory' changed to 'Dig for Plenty'. In 1945, the new Labour Government had to replace the bombed housing stock as well as beginning the mammoth task of slum clearance. As a result, the need for house building land came into direct conflict with the desire for allotments. Not only that – there was also bomb damage to allotments, particularly in the London area. TNT residue and bomb craters were of little use to gardeners! Shortages and rationing continued for some years after the conclusion of hostilities, and confirmed the importance of the allotment as a source of fresh produce. During the war, many parks were given over to allotments in grassy areas, and now people were keen to restore the play areas to grass.

Disputes over allotments between the authorities and holders have always been numerous. To give just one local example: a Nottingham allotment site was threatened with closure as the land was to be allocated by the council to a local cycle manufacturer, as a distribution hub, given the site's proximity to the M1. After several visits to the courts, a compromise was agreed, but in the end the cycle company chose another site and the old allotment site was left abandoned for nearly 10 years. The last century saw some seven Allotments Acts passed by Parliament. The last one, enacted in 1950, recorded just over a million plots, and it is this Act which is largely the one in force today.

The 1960s was a period of decline for the allotment movement. As the property sharks circled the prime sites, the loss of members financially

weakened the National Allotment and Garden Society and, thus, its ability to defend sites from closure. From 1950 to 1965, the number of allotment plots fell by roughly half, but numbers picked up in the 1970s and the early 1980s. The environmental movement in particular provided a fillip, and new members joined who were concerned about modern methods of farming. The BBC's *Gardeners' World* and other recent television programmes have actively promoted allotments. These ideas of working together collectively, of relating to the local community (often by association with local schools), of green spaces in grey urban environments, food which is fresh and has low transport costs, and the provision of interesting work carried out at one's own pace, underpin the allotment movement.

The last chapter on the culture of allotments is provokingly thoughtful, discussing the politics of the movement together with more mundane matters such as the 'shed'. Allotments have a long and proud history and are a 'dynamic part of contemporary life'. *Growing Space* records the vicissitudes of the allotment movement with considerable insight and detail, and stands as a useful contribution to the social history of the 20th and early 21st century. The publishers are to be thanked for bringing this book into the public domain and for the intelligent use of colour photographs, which enliven the text. *Growing Space* shows the allotment movement is very much alive and that there is much we can all learn from it, and much we might have to learn with the looming threat of climate change.

John Daniels
Bulwell allotment holder

Vital Byron

Richard Lansdown (editor), *Byron's Letters and Journals: A New Selection*, Oxford University Press, 2015, 560 pages, hardback ISBN 9780198722557, £30

Admirers of Lord George Gordon Noel Byron generally fall into two camps: those who adore his poetic output, and those fascinated by his uncompromising, chaotically romantic life. Those who consider themselves in the former camp may find their man within the astonishing lines of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* or the cantos of *Don Juan*. Those in the latter could do worse than delve into this selection of letters and

journals by the original holder – 150 years before The Beatles – of the suffix ‘-mania’, to flesh out their hero.

The editor, Richard Lansdown, rather gamely sets himself as a hostage to fortune with introductory gusto, quoting his 19th Century Byron archivist predecessor, Rowland Prothero:

‘Byron’s letters appeal on three special grounds to all lovers of English Literature: they offer the most suggestive commentary on his poetry; they give the truest portrait of the man; they possess, at their best, in their ease, freshness and racy vigour, a very high literary value’.

Byron’s letters are not mere scribblings, juvenilia, or words best left for the eyes of their recipients. They are an essential element of not just the Byron canon, but also of something wider: equal to and surpassing

‘Keats’ letters, Coleridge’s notebooks, and De Quincy’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* ... Pepys’ diary and Boswell’s journal’.

Does Lansdown’s selection justify his bold claims?

A smattering of letters from Byron’s youth opens the anthology, as he arrives at Newstead Abbey, Nottinghamshire, in the English Midlands, seemingly lonely and nervous at his new role as heir to the Byrons’ ancestral home. Freudians will have a field day with his pleas for attention sent to his mother; while more salacious eyes will scan keenly the notes to his half-sister; each with its own desperate sense of longing. Readers of *The Spokesman* will, perhaps, seek out the Byron who fascinated Russell: the humanist, the pacifist, the rebel. You will not be disappointed.

Why has Byron endured as a contemporary hero, while contemporaries such as Shelley are seen as fixed in their time? ‘Byronesque’ is a catch-all for the poetic radical; the revolutionary who buckled his swash with a breath-taking, sexually charged élan? Outside certain cloisters of impeccably mannered academics, where does ‘Shelleyesque’ strike chords? We do him a great disservice when we call him the ‘rock star of his day’; those mass-adored strutting peacocks, from Jagger onwards, owe a debt to Byron, rather than vice versa. When it came to moistening gussets and stiffening boned breeches, even the most dedicated bohemian musician falls short of this platonic idealisation.

Lansdown’s introduction to the two year period following Byron’s return to England from his Grand Tour, in the Summer of 1811, is particularly enlightening, showing that, while Byron seldom had a dull month, this particular period was defining: his political career; his first publishing breakthrough; and, of course, his scandalous and public affair

with Lady Caroline Lamb, thrust him into the limelight.

Many friends, and his mother, died in a short period of time. Byron's ensuing melancholy seems to ferment into something potent, an intoxicant that never let go. '*A curse hangs over me and mine*' Byron writes to a friend in August 1811, '*I am almost desolate – left almost alone in the world*'. Sodden with grief, he takes up politics, claiming his seat in the House of Lords. Of course, being Byron, this is done kicking against the comfortable status quo. His maiden speech on the 'Frame Work' bill – not included here, but easily found elsewhere – is one of the finest pieces of political oratory ever heard in those chambers; a passionate defence of the Luddites, who sought to defend their livelihoods as hosiery makers, and an attack on those who advocated execution and violence to quell them. '*I have seen the state of the miserable men, and it is a disgrace to a civilized country*', Byron explains to his political mentor, Henry Vassall-Fox, on the eve of the speech. Amusingly, Byron engages in a little behind-the-scenes chicanery to ensure his message is heard elsewhere, sending his anonymous '*Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill*' to *The Morning Chronicle*. '*Of course, do not put my name to the thing*', he tells the editor.

Byron's political career re-emerged years later, when he was further radicalised into direct action. But his time in the Lords was short-lived, for the surprisingly rapid success of *Childe Harolde* came soon after. Byron had arrived; returning from his travels, yet covered with grief, somehow liberated the good Lord's mind, giving impetus to his stab at immortality. The poet was born.

The 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know' tag might have seen Byron hounded out of the country, but it has done more to keep his legacy vital than he could ever have dreamt.

When Nottingham decided to bid for recognition as a UNESCO City of Literature, in 2014, Byron became central to celebrating its 'Rebel Town' history: alongside the original 'Angry Young Man', Alan Sillitoe, and that prickly challenger of social hypocrisy, D H Lawrence. Harnessing that spirit, which has commonality from Newstead to Nepal, is a much different approach to that of the dozen cities recognised so far. Byron forms part of Nottingham's radical continuum that flashes through history: the English Civil War; the Luddites; burning down Nottingham Castle in 1831 when the resident aristocrat, the Duke of Newcastle, voted against widening the franchise.

Greece and the financial crisis is, perhaps, the latest manifestation of Byron's continuing relevance. '*Greece; it is the only place I was ever contented in*', he wrote in June 1823, before embarking for the Ottoman-

occupied country, after a long stay in Italy began to engender a sense of ennui. Arriving at Missolonghi, Byron was greeted as the saviour, but later succumbed to fever. His physician bled him repeatedly, as was the practice of the time. Sepsis probably set in and, weakened by cuts, he died. A comparison with the financial crisis is almost scarily analogous: Greece, a weakened but recovering body, subjected to deeper cuts, hurtling closer to the grave. One of the most romantic of all the statues of Byron stands close to the Greek Parliament in Athens: Byron, foot un-clubbed and hair perfectly tousled, is crowned by Greece, a chiselled, noble woman. From his outcry against the theft of the Elgin Marbles (Byron was very much opposed to Elgin's desecration of the Parthenon: see *The Curse of Minerva*) to his hatred of tyranny, Byron has become an enduring archetype of the poetic hero: living fast, dying young, leaving a good-looking corpse.

The annotations are generous, and Lansdown's introductions to each chapter are comprehensive and contextualising, often with an unsparing aside: Lady Caroline Lamb and Lady Byron, among others, are described unequivocally as '*dysfunctional and humourless admirers ... self-interested fabricators*'. The rather Spartan index is, therefore, a mild disappointment, though a good way to find a chewy morsel. '*Byron: diet*' brings up some fascinating ruminations on his antipathy to wine '*... it makes me savage and suspicious*', before castigating himself for being so precious about his habits – '*Excuse this old woman's letter*'. '*Byron: animals*', with a staggering 17 entries, ranging from his early love of horses to his Newfoundland dog, Boatswain, the truest love of his life, to his more eccentric purchases – an ugly, tailless guard dog he named Mutz; numerous 'charming' monkeys; tortoises, and just about anything else furred, feathered or scaled; to an anecdote he relates of an elephant getting free in Venice – '*mad for want of a She, it being the rutting month*', eventually being bought down by cannon shot: all observed from the safety of a gondola. The inclusion of such nuggets elevates this book from a scholarly tome on Byron; it drips with contemporary and geographic colour.

For those seeking a decent reference book about Byron, then this is our generation's essential purchase: Lansdown's high intellectual standard is a gift. For those wanting a salacious taste of his life, again, I recommend: this selection titillates; it thrills. Dip in, with a spit-moistened finger, and find a life lived poetically, a poem lived out in flesh. While Byron's bones lie under the cold stone of Hucknall's St Mary Magdalene Church, his spirit is more vital than ever.

Matt Turpin



Here we are again!!

**CATHERINE MARSHALL
VIOLET TILLARD
JOAN BEAUCHAMP
LYDIA SMITH**

Anti-war activists, editors and publishers
of the No-Conscription Fellowship
1915-1920



Cranks and Kites

Emily Johns and Gabriel Carlyle, *The World is My Country: A Celebration of the People and Movements that Opposed the First World War in 10 posters and stories*, Peace News Press, 2015, 98 pages, ISBN 9781904527183, £6

Oliver Haslam and PPU Publications Group, *Refusing to Kill: Conscientious Objection and Human Rights in the First World War*, Peace Pledge Union Publications, 2014, 74 pages, ISBN 9780902680524, £10

Two peace-oriented publishers; two different approaches to presenting the lives of conscientious objectors and opponents of the First World War. *The World is My Country* calls itself a ‘celebration’, whereas *Refusing to Kill* is a more sombre appraisal, and pulls no punches. Read together, they prove there is room to remember both the anguish and the triumphs of this extremely diverse group.

Refusing to Kill is primarily intended for use by teachers and students, as the layout and language indicate. It outlines the various forms of conscientious objection, such as non-combatant COs, who would drill and train but not serve; those who submitted to alternative labour; and absolutists, who opposed the entire system of compulsory service and did not recognise the government’s authority to command them to undertake it. The author takes care to unpack the historical and social context around particular conflicts, for example the limited appreciation for what we would now consider ‘human rights’ as the First World War was brewing. This creates a more rounded impression of what conscientious objectors really opposed, and their unique position. Readers well-versed on the topic might find it repetitive, but I dare say there are useful sections for even the expert.

A particularly valuable passage about the present day suggests that some recruits who go absent without leave from the UK armed forces are unaware that, should they develop moral concerns, they do have the right to stop serving. The words of a deserting paramedic, consumed with doubt after being recalled in 2003 for the Iraq War, confirm the fact:

‘I never heard the words [conscientious objection]. People think I should have known about it, but there are officers who have been in the RAF twenty years who don’t know about it.’

How could such a fundamental right go unheard? In some other countries there is still no provision for conscientious objection – oughtn’t we



THEATRE ROYAL STRATFORD

The Public Prosecutor
on war

“WAR WILL BECOME
IMPOSSIBLE IF ALL
MEN WERE TO
HAVE THE VIEW
THAT WAR IS



WRONG”
A.H. Bodkin, K.C., speaking
on behalf of the Public Prosecutor at the
Mansion House, London, May 17th, 1916, in the
case against the No-Conscription Fellowship



War will become impossible

YOU WILL BECOME IMPOSSIBLE IF ALL MEN WERE TO HAVE THE VIEW THAT WAR IS WRONG

The Public Prosecutor on war
“WAR WILL BECOME IMPOSSIBLE IF ALL MEN WERE TO HAVE THE VIEW THAT WAR IS WRONG”



THE NO-CONSCRIPTION FELLOWSHIP SUPPORTED MEN WHO REUSED CONSCRIPTION DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR
Edward Fuller was taken to court (with Bodkin as prosecutor) for requesting a quote for an poster put up in East London. The NCF offered to support Bodkin's family if he ever had to prosecute himself for making another "involuntary pacifist speech."

champion the fact that we are permitted this freedom? There can be no conceivable benefit to the government in wasting time and resources sentencing AWOL service members if simple changes to briefing procedures can be made.

Other troubling case studies include the trial of an objector to the Iraq War, who was court-martialled following the decision that his objection was 'political' and therefore invalid. This was despite the fact that 'selective objection' has been recognised in Britain since 1940, and that the individual was willing to serve as an unarmed paramedic. Depressingly, it would seem that even now it is hard to secure a mutually agreed period of conscientious exemption – the fickle spirit of the old tribunals lives on.

To switch tack, and book, *The World is My Country* covers the historical and geopolitical context of the First World War as well, but its vignettes about pacifist personalities are its treasures. We are gently reminded that peace activists – and indeed, those they oppose – are also allowed to engage each other with a sense of humour. A prime example, 'The great case of Bodkin v. Bodkin', concerns a government lawyer's offhand remark that, unbeknownst to him, had made its way onto a No-Conscription Fellowship poster, and been exhibited around the streets of London in late 1916. The genesis of this unusual scenario was the trial of eight members of the NCF earlier the same year, for printing an anti-conscription leaflet. At this trial the prosecutor, Crown Advocate Archibald Bodkin, issued the soon-to-be fateful words 'War will become impossible if all men were to have the view that war is wrong'. The story continues:

'Believing that Bodkin had 'kindly provided us with such a terse and explicit phrase, expressing our view regarding war', the NCF mischievously turned Bodkin's unwitting 'pacifist speech' into a poster, and had copies printed by the National Labour Press.'

One Edward Fuller came a cropper of the law when the War Office learned he was seeking a quote for the poster. Bodkin served as prosecutor at the ensuing trial, during which a War Office senior official had to admit the quote was 'perfectly true'; 'a platitude'. Fuller was convicted and fined, but on a positive note the poster's text received a great deal of public exposure.

To further rub Bodkin's nose in it, the NCF's newspaper, the *Tribunal*, pledged that if he 'decide[d] in his devotion to duty to prosecute himself' that they would offer their assistance to his dependents 'should they be threatened with financial or other difficulty as a result of his persecution at

the hands of the State or himself’.

We also discover people like Frances Sheehy-Skeffington, who steered himself by the causes of feminism, pacifism, socialism and Irish nationalism. His section contains one of those comebacks you only wish you’d be quick enough to fire off yourself: some considered him a crank, and he was not displeased at this, for ‘a crank is a small instrument that makes revolutions’.

It seems Sheehy-Skeffington was a lone voice railing against war amid the mass enlistment of his countrymen. The 1916 Easter Rising saw him apprehended by the British military, against the likes of whom he did not seem to bear a grudge, for we are told

‘he had braved a hail of bullets to try to rescue a wounded British soldier, explaining: “I could not let anyone bleed to death while I could still help”.’

Two days after this selfless act, he was executed.

As one might expect, the authors also cherry-pick some of Bertrand Russell’s many exploits. It is Russell’s ill-timed banning order that comes up, and how some lectures he had planned to give found an audience even despite him being banned from effectively a third of the country. Found guilty of ‘making statements likely to prejudice recruiting’, he was prohibited to ‘reside in or enter’ particular areas as defined under the Aliens Restrictions Act 1914. In body, he apparently obeyed – yet in voice he travelled widely indeed. A few months later Robert Smillie, President of the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain, began to deliver one of Russell’s lectures to an immense crowd at a Glasgow protest meeting. Unaware at first, those gathered were delighted when he revealed the ruse.

Russell also appears in *Refusing to Kill*, but Catherine Marshall, his comrade in the No-Conscription Fellowship, is given a touch more limelight, in a chapter dedicated to the women’s peace movement. There is a particularly nice account of her sending imprisoned COs secret messages, by arranging for children to get white kites ‘caught’ in a certain tree outside the jail. This was to signal to them that the No-Conscription Fellowship – from whom the prisoners had sought advice – wished for them not to revolt against the prison rules. A signal in red rather than white would have signalled that they *should*.

This pair of texts makes a fine and comprehensive overview of the subject. Comparisons in *Refusing to Kill* between the public view of conscientious objection in the First World War and in modern conflicts show how far we have come, and how much there is yet to achieve. For instance, we could scarcely conceive of conscientious objectors today

being disenfranchised, but those of the First World War were – some up until August 1926. This was possibly the least of the indignities COs endured. Many of the punishments listed in the book amount to torture – not only physically brutalised in prison, but starved of human connection in many cases. All this, not for killing, but refusing to kill.

A stand-out sentence in *Refusing to Kill*'s ultimate analysis is that 'Britain did not deal with its own militarism', and so much of the heroics of WWI were in fact futile gestures – more conflict was born out of the loose ends. If only we could say what a difference 100 years makes.

Nicole Morris

Something better

Andrew Bibby, *All Our Own Work: The co-operative pioneers of Hebden Bridge and their mill*, Merlin Press, 2015, 238 pages, paperback ISBN 9780850367102, £15.95

The publication of any book on the UK co-operative movement is a rare event and one to be welcomed. A book about a co-operative of workers and their 'productive society' is especially welcome. This is a sector of the movement which has been represented by hundreds of such societies but hitherto has been disregarded by historians, even by those with an interest in co-operatives. Andrew Bibby's book brings to life the day to day problems, failures and successes of the UK's largest ever 'productive society' – or 'worker co-op' as we might call it today – the Hebden Bridge Fustian Manufacturing Society.

The society was formed in 1870, after Joseph Greenwood and fellow delegates from the local store society, the Hebden Bridge Industrial Co-operative Society, attended the Co-operative Congress in Manchester. Within three months their new fustian (coarse cotton) society was up and running, and within a year had 112 members and was employing 17 of them in fustian cutting. The author follows their every move, from cutting to dyeing, making clothes, and, eventually, to controlling the whole process from the water in their own reservoir that powered the machinery at the Nutclough Mill, to the supply of products to co-operative societies and other customers throughout Britain.

This is not just a business history. The Fustian Society was from its beginning committed to promoting education and, in the 1880s, was

paying almost all the costs of holding free lectures by academics from Oxford University, which were attended by as many as 700 people. From these beginnings the Fustian Society was instrumental in the development of the University Extension Movement and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). This developed from a village with a population of just a few thousand.

The co-operators of Hebden Bridge were also in at the beginning of the Women's Co-operative Guild, having the distinction of setting up the Guild's first branch in 1883. The International Co-operative Alliance also owes much to Hebden Bridge co-operators in its early years. It is one of the strengths of *All Our Own Work* that it examines the development of co-operative ideas and philosophies among the society's leading figures and how, from the Fustian Society, emerged co-operators with clear principles and extended visions, several of whom went on to hold influential positions in the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), the Co-operative Union, and the Co-operative Productive Federation.

Andrew Bibby does not present the history as one of interrupted successes in an onward and upward march of progress. He looks critically at decisions the society made in its early years which affected its relationships with workers and with other co-operative societies in particular; with its sometimes difficult relations with trade unions in the period following the 'new unionism' of the 1890s; the lack of women on the society's committees and delegations; the lack of clear evidence that Nutclough workers were materially better off from being co-operative employees than of any other local employer; and the long running debates about the 'bounty to labour' and the rival claims of the 'workerist' and 'consumerist' co-operative advocates.

The voices of the men and women who worked in the mill are few and far between, but that is unfortunately true of most histories of working class life in this period. We do, however, have several accounts of the society's history written by Greenwood himself, and many other sources which Andrew has used extensively. Had the society survived as a productive society for two more years there would doubtless have been a jubilee history, published in 1920 to mark their 50th year, and Joseph Greenwood, then aged 87, might well have been its author. I have no doubt that he would have approved of Andrew Bibby's questioning but affectionate approach.

This is not just a readable and fascinating history, but also a well-timed account of dilemmas that new co-operatives still have to face, especially those in the worker co-op sector and in the various hybrid co-operatives

that have emerged in recent years. The failures at the Co-operative Bank and the Co-operative Group have severely dented the confidence of many co-operators, but the growth of the worker co-op sector and new co-ops in sustainable energy are now emerging as a new force in the movement. May there be many more books like this one to show us how co-operators of the past dealt with their dilemmas so that, in Greenwood's words, 'out of their imperfect society something better in the future might evolve'.

Christopher Richardson

A bookseller in Venice

The return of Marxism? I keep reading about it, yet the radical bookshop where I work has a solitary copy of *Capital* volume one which has been snoozing away gently for two years (and nobody has ever ordered the other volumes). The Venice Biennale, which attracts tens of thousands of artie fartie people from all over the world, chose, this year, to be more political and a showpiece was the daily reading from *Capital* in the main performance space. There it was then, the *Capital Oratorio*, where two professionals used up a fair amount of the Biennale ticket price reading aloud ... reading, when I was there, economic equations, to a house that started off small and, within minutes, had shrunk to me and two Chinese students checking their emails. And then only to the two Chinese students.

I found this year's Biennale rather dull. It's a bit of a problem with installation art which is basically trying to be socialist and cutting edge without presenting a succession of images of people being horrible to other people. Or at least it was here, representing the theme of *All the World's Futures*. The previous Biennale managed to summarise such politics really well with the now famous Jeremy Deller picture of William Morris rising up out of the sea and sinking one of the rich people's mega yachts which had been dominating the shoreline.

Naturally, there is the usual wtf artspeak descriptions of things and plenty opportunities to say 'what, really?' such as the pavilion whose art installation is that the ceiling is painted black and is otherwise completely empty. The British pavilion was painted a gorgeous yellow and I'd have been happier if it had remained empty rather than filled with Sarah Lucas's blow up torsos and plaster casts of the lower half of some of her mates, naked and with cigarettes sticking out of their assorted orifices. *All the world's future's?* Maybe.

There were surprises – like the Congolese artists who try to keep alive

the ideas of the Situationist International, but the best pavilion was one made of glass whose entire exhibition was of itself being shattered and, inside, nothing but large broken frames of glass. It could be seen in 30 seconds and *Kristalnacht* came to mind at once. To be fair, there were playful aspects on the site – three entire French trees which moved around slowly on unseen platforms and, from Japan, a delightful installation by Chiharu Shiota of a room full of red yarn from which hung keys, drifting down to two rowing boats below. I am sure there was a deeper, solemn meaning, but to me it was just a thing of beauty.

The best saved itself to last, by chance, as it is easy to wander from pavilion to pavilion at the main, Giardini, site, randomly. A Polish opera company was filmed performing *Halka*, the Polish national opera, in the open air to impoverished villagers in Haiti. One girl had brought her goat with her to the performance, occasionally a dog would walk through the set, and once or twice – it was performed at a crossroads – a bemused lad on a motorbike would sail through. Why there? That village is inhabited by the descendants of Polish soldiers who deserted from the French army in the first decade of the nineteenth century to join the Haitian resistance and became stranded. Even now the villagers include people who are nearly white and have sort of Polish names. One of the themes of the Biennale is ‘identity’. I have no idea what the Haitians thought of these people coming there to perform, but colonialism is like that – we go there, they come here, and things are never the same.

If the Giardini is not enough, the contrasting Arsenale site comprises a long series of interlinked rooms, once the site of a ship-building factory. In the *London Review of Books* Alice Sprawls referred to the space here as unrelenting at the best of times (though I did not find it so previously) and I walked through the aisles stunned. This was art as a machine, grinding into your brain forever. You had to be there to understand. It was a relief to find one of the last exhibition rooms where Mozambique had forgotten the rules and had a small exhibition of the country’s literature, music and folk art, suitable for any classroom trip.

Back in Venice itself, all the world’s futures continue to collide with the right-wing mayor banning a gay pride march and continuing to welcome cruise ships the size of a small nation state, whose visits are destroying the canals and local ecology.

Ross Bradshaw
www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk